

An Evolving Struggle : The Cure

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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by

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Abstract

I am fascinated with how the body is affected by internal and external factors that define how the body responds to the duality of compression. This duality is seen in positive terms through support, and in negative terms through constriction and stress. The interaction of the body's response determines the predisposition and appearance of disease. Within my work, series of multiple, similar objects are created that demonstrate my interest in the performative act of caring for others. Subtleties and nuances in one inform the next, and ideas continually evolve through disassembling and abstracting objects in order to refine and enhance them. As objects are introduced to methods of stress, their reactions are recorded. I am able to use the potential of malleable ceramic material to mimic the body's ability to adapt to stress and abuse and create a record of performative acts explored in terms of the ritual and the mundane. Ritual is examined by creating objects that reflect special care and preparation that is taken to care for a person like when a bodily specimen is prepared for analysis. Mundane is examined by incorporating tools of everyday care, like a q-tip. These interests guide the creation and progression of performance and the means tools are utilized to create a personal semiology.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Vita.....	iii
List of Figures.....	v
Introduction.....	vi
Chapter 1: The Duality of Compression.....	7
Chapter 2: The Compressor and the Compressed.....	12
Chapter 3: The Ritual and the Mundane.....	15
Chapter 4: Tools and Communication.....	18
Conclusion.....	21
References.....	22
Appendix.....	23

List of Figures

Figure 1. Plaster casts of bodies of two victims of Vesuvius eruption that impacted Pompeii in 79 C.D. from the excavations of the garden of the House of Cryptoporticus or House of T. Lecretius Carus that occurred in July 1914.....	8
Figure 2. External negative Spaces.....	9
Figure 3. Mongolian girl training.....	10
Figure 4. Compressing To Mend.....	12
Figure 5. Compression: The Compressed.....	15
Figure 6. Precious Hygiene Detail.....	17
Figure 7. Meat Hook : The Cure.....	20
Figure 8. Internal Negative Spaces.....	25
Figure 9. An Evolving Struggle.....	25
Figure 10. Compression.....	26
Figure 11. Compression.....	27
Figure 12. Specimen.....	28
Figure 13. Specimen Detail.....	29
Figure 14. Precious Hygiene.....	29
Figure 15. Consumption On Eggshells.....	30
Figure 16. To Give and To Get.....	30
Figure 17. Reminders.....	31
Figure 18. Reminders	31

Figure 19. Shroud and Interchange.....	33
Figure 20. Shroud.....	33
Figure 21. Interchange.....	34
Figure 22. Forgive My Transgressions.....	34
Figure 23. Forgive My Transgressions Detail	35

Introduction

Art is a language, or system of communication, that connects experience (singular or collective) with semiology created by muscle function. It is a language that connects the ability to physically convey the processing of vision by the brain. However, the human capacity of emotion in combination with individual perception and time is what creates an endless supply of possibilities to what can be conveyed through art. The importance of these factors can be further explained Edward A. Sapir.

“Language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience...but actually defines experiences for us because of our unconscious projection of its explicit expectations into the field of experience.”

Defining art as a language applies to my artistic practice of exploring nature vs. nurture to express how my experiences, perception, and memories have shaped the person I have become. Although violent memories are often the source of my art making, I use those memories to investigate productive questions in order to provide restorative answers. Therefore, I am interested in the bodily response to abuse and stress as it compensates and heals, and the capacity of physical healing to become a metaphor for emotional healing. Healthcare topics such as disease pathways, patient response, and healthcare model pathways that compare Eastern and Western treatment methods, inform my art practice by allowing me to examine dysfunctions in the human body and pinpoint causal variables.

Chapter 1: The Duality of Compression

The figurative image can achieve power through provoking an empathetic response of the viewer. My initial interest in creating objects occurred in the ability to reveal complexities of the human condition by producing figurative images that explored vulnerability in order to provoke empathetic responses. I began experimenting with contortion of the body and texturized surface application.



Figure 1. Plaster casts of bodies of two victims of Vesuvius eruption that impacted Pompeii in 79 C.D. from the excavations of the garden of the House of Cryptoporticus or House of T. Lecretius Carus that occurred in July 1914

Fast firing clay bodies with high contents of iron allowed for carbon trapping during the firing process, which created deep craters on the surface of my forms. The melting, expansion, and contraction of the surface resulted in what resembled melting flesh. The dynamic texture provided a tactile quality similar to the melted flesh of the victims of the volcanic explosions that were excavated from Pompeii. The surface became invitingly curious and yet abhorrent or insinuated suffering.



Figure 2. Internal Negative Spaces

The contradictory outcomes of the surfaces were reflected in the seemingly impossible contorted figures, which assumed positions commonly practiced in Mongolian contortion. This contortion and abstract manipulation of the body became a metaphor for how the body processes and responds to struggle. While working through creating



Figure 3. Mongolian girl training

contorted figures, I came to the conclusion that contortion is actually a process that requires consistent resolution and equilibrium of mind and body, which means it was inappropriate to use this type of display to convey a sense of struggle.

Struggle is defined as making forceful or violent efforts to get free of restraint or constriction. In other words, struggles are experiences and additions that cause unrest to a form, which equally and oppositely engages a response in order to achieve homeostasis. It was not that I was fascinated with the concept of struggle, but rather that I was fascinated with how the cyclical process of experiencing obstacles and overcoming them shape the human condition. Furthermore, I was interested in the roles of nature versus

nurture in this process in terms of how surroundings, memories, and relationships influence problem-solving abilities to create solutions. Through my experimentation with contortion of the figure, I was able to conclude that solution is not an erasure or disillusionment of the past, but simply a resolution and return to balance. By returning to balance, humans are able to use memory to produce empathy and comfort for other forms of struggle.

Through the description of struggle as an action rather than a specific image, I was able to further define my interest in creating objects that reflected this goal. Therefore, I began using my own memories of surroundings and relationships involved in overcoming particular struggles to guide my artistic practice. This series of experimentation began with exploring the materiality of clay in terms of working with its malleable and recordable properties. Gravity and the force of my hand compressed the clay and became embodiments of struggle or stress. However, I realized that a duality existed in my action of compressing. The duality of compression was seen in positive terms through support, and in negative terms through constriction and stress. I was equally exploring the relationship between stress and comfort.



Figure 4. Compressing To Mend

Chapter 2: The Compressor and the Compressed

In the medical field, I was trained to biologically understand the body and administer procedures to fix abnormal functioning. I studied this because I thought it would enable me to care for others. However, as I administered procedures that harmed patients more than they provided relief I began questioning my role in care giving. My experience with patient care led me to theorize that I was actually providing compression, which can be positive in some circumstances as care and support, and in others, as negative and affect the body as stress.

As my artistic practice expanded to include interests based on actions, I began a series of performances to explore the actions and roles involved in experiencing compression in terms of one body acting on another. I wrapped a model's body and then my own body with layers of string and pillows. Through a seemingly endless rhythmic manipulation of the body, the result is an impression of string, recorded on the skin and emphasized by an aggregation of blood. The string becomes used as a tool for mark making and records the body's response as it tries to heal and achieve homeostasis. The crossing lines that band around my leg are a record of the wrapping, or my intention to heal. However, they also display the damage that this same intention can cause and the delicate balance found in the spectrum of compression.

The choice of which body parts to wrap was based on the physical and emotional pain previously experienced by the model and myself. Wrapping was chosen as my method of care giving so I could bind the injured parts together, like when a splint binds a

broken bone so it can heal. The layering of the string and pillows with my body became obsessive. I was thoughtful in the placement of the materials, but my movements vary from calculated to urgent. At times, my urgency approaches desperation. The frustrated, chaotic unraveling of the string or the distressed placement of cotton to provide relief from the string cutting into my thigh was an uncontrolled reflex, or innate response. These contradictory themes were nuanced by the visual contrast of the light and dark colors of my skin against my dark clothes. This contrast also enhanced the residual evidence of the string.

Each performance is a memory that I am unable to vocalize made solid in visual form. Working through my vulnerability by honestly responding to the fears trapped inside was unexpectedly emotional. The performance was physically challenging; the shell created by the forward bending of my torso until it met my thigh made my body numb. My immobilization induced a claustrophobic panic. However, as I adapted to the sensations, I found I could enter a meditative experience. I began to slowly rock side to side, which provided a soothing physical rhythm, and embraced the comfort and nostalgia of the fetal like position.

The complex contradictions involved in compression are emphasized in the contrast between the calculated speed of the wrapping and the fast, chaotic, urgent speed of undoing it all. Although the meditative quality of providing comfort was the overall intention, there was a sense of frustration throughout the entire performance. The performances began with the intensity of being completely wrapped, and ended in the same way. Experiencing compression becomes relentless.



Figure 5. Compression: The Compressed

Chapter 3: The Ritual and the Mundane

The understanding of the nuances within the actions, bodily relationships, and bodily reactions associated with compression allowed me to define the type of performance that was occurring. Franz Erhard Walther defines performance as a display or work-in-action, while the performative act is more closely related to a work demonstration or work-in-action. My series of performances were demonstrations of work-in-action and were therefore, performative acts. Transferring this information to my multiple series of objects allowed my investigations to involve the making of multiples of objects that are based on my interest in caring for others and myself as a performative act.

The awareness of nuances associated with care giving revealed a spectrum of the performative, and is explored in terms of the ritual and the mundane. The ritual is explored by creating objects that reflect special care and preparation that is taken to care for a person, like when a bodily specimen is prepared for analysis. The mundane is explored by incorporating tools of everyday care, like a q-tip. There is room for attention within a particular action for rhythm as the performer slowly provides attentive focus to one action and then quickly performs another action that does not require concentration. Patterns of rhythm were then transferred to my object making process.



Figure 6. Precious Hygiene Detail

Each object created in a series is similar, but no object is the same. Subtleties in one inform the next, and ideas continually evolve through disassembling and abstracting objects in order to refine and enhance them. As objects are introduced to methods of stress, their reactions are recorded. By doing this, my materials mimic the body's ability to adapt to stress and abuse, and I am able to use the potential of the malleable ceramic material to act as a record of performative acts through sculpture. Rhythm is conveyed throughout the forms in areas of minute detail that are juxtaposed with large areas of negative space, monotone colors, and similar materials. A large role of batting, paper, and fabric are compared with the quick performative moments where concentration is not needed, while a ceramic band bound repetitively with thin thread requires the viewer to slow as they engage with each line that traces the form of the constriction (the ceramic

band).

The location of the rhythm from the interactions of ritual and mundane activity is founded in moments that represent changes in action. The meeting point of ceramic fabric and a reed of bamboo, where a sense of gravity is seen in the occurrence of compression of one object acting on another, is emphasized with intense details of mending. The moments of stress or violence are natural records of my treatment of materials and interact with my attempts of restoration or support. These exchanges reflect the contradictions and frustrations expressed in my performances exploring the roles of compression, and begin to similarly become relentless.

Chapter 4: Communication and Tools

The demonstration of work in action as the performative component to my object making made me question what my tools were for working. What were my devices or the extensions of my hand that assisted in my work, and how did the traces of these devices contribute an additional element of communication in my completed pieces.

One tool implemented was the needle, which was used to sew with thread to mend my violent actions. While the needle has the capacity to mend by pulling two separate pieces of material together, it also leaves traces of puncturing and the record of violence is not erased. Revisiting the concept that healing is not the disillusionment of the past allowed me to embrace the ability of my materials to convey memory.

Connecting with my memories allowed my work to reflect my experience and interest in other fields, such as meat processing. As a child, I was taught to hunt and process the meat as a means to survive. My most profound memory was guiding the sharp meat hooks through the fleshy ankle of the animal and hanging it upside down. This display of the last moment of the animal in its entirety before it was processed allowed me to realize the consequences of my actions and choosing to end a life. In my piece “Meat Hook : The Cure”, I conveyed this same moment. The empty hooks on either side of the long hanging form that references the body represent the cyclical process of meat processing and allude to the slaughtered bodies to come. As a snapshot in time in conveyed, my intention is to encourage the viewer to question what can actually come

next and whether the cycle can be broken.



Figure 7. Meat Hook : The Cure

The type of language I began recognizing expanded to include communicative elements found in nature, such as asposematism. Asposematism is a natural semiology for danger as seen in the contrasting orange and black colors of a Monarch butterfly, which warns predators that the organism contains poisonous chemicals. However, people find the butterfly beautiful and are even taught to catch them as children to admire them

closer. My work embraced this quality of linking beauty and nostalgic feelings to allure the viewer even though the colors may actually serve as a warning that the content contains violence.

The tools that construct my visual language stem from my experiences and memories, particularly from my childhood. They reflect the nostalgic feelings I have for sewing and quilting with the women in my family, hunting with my father, or playing outside in the summertime. Although the relationships I built during these times were positive and nurturing, I also remember abuse associated with these memories. My work reflects the duality and contradiction of my experiences.

Conclusion

My goal and function as an artist is to create work that responds to my experience of death and disease, particularly within my own family. By recording my ethical questions, solutions, and definitions to healthcare, I hope that my work encourages viewers to question present systems and creatively think of new solutions. I hope that my interconnectivity of healthcare and art encourages the questioning of the mundane actions associated with giving care and the constant deconstruction and abstraction of current systems and procedures so that quality of life and humanitarian goals become fundamental to healthcare.

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Appendix

The appendix documents the progression of work from the beginning of my work ceramics at the Ohio State University until my Bachelor of Fine Arts final Undergraduate Exhibition that is not already included in the previous sections of this research thesis.

Figure 8 is an image of the documentation of my experimentation with bloating clay bodies and was sculpted out of clay, cut in half and hollowed, and filled with black bloating clay. The object is 9 inches (length) by 3 inches (width) by 4 inches (height). Figure 9 was the product of experimentation practiced in Figure 8, and was a life size self portrait coil built out of terracotta clay, coated in bloating clay, and then carved. During the transition from portraiture work to metaphorical demonstrations of the body, a mold was created from by back. Figure 10 and 11 are the products from this mold and were made of terracotta clay. After the objects were fired, fabric pillows were created to experiment with my interest in compression. Figures 10 and 11 are 12 inches (length) by 7 inches (width) by 19 inches (height).



Figure 8. Internal Negative Spaces



Figure 9. An Evolving Struggle



Figure 10. Compression



Figure 11. Compression

Figures 12 through 18 represent the second phase of ceramic experimentation that occurred as part as a transition away from using the figure literally and toward demonstrating the figure as an experiential being through metaphorical forms and symbols. Figure 12 is made of white earthenware, underglaze, orange wax dipped linen, parchment paper, batting, and wood; and is 67 inches (length) by 2 inches (width) by 11.5 inches (height). Figure 14 was a form created using a printmaking process over fabric, and then pouring slip cast on the back of the printed designs. It is made of earthenware, porcelain, glaze, underglaze, slip, q-tips, resin, thread; and is 11 inches (length) by 11 inches (width) by 13 inches (height). Figure 15 was a porcelain stomach made by using egg cartons as a press mold and attaching the pieces together. It was finished with zinc oxide and silver luster. The form is 17 inches (length) by 12 inches (width) by 21 inches

(height). Figure 17 is the documentation of a series of objects created as a precursor to the series of objects entitled “Interchange”. The objects were guided by intuition and consist of a wide variety of manipulated and found materials. Some materials include porcelain, earthenware, thread, cotton, bloating clay, resin, glaze, underglaze, vinyl, q-tips, and fabric. Lastly, figure 18 was a wall piece that concentrated on the overarching concepts found in religion and in meat processing. It was created by stuffing a casing made of netting with porcelain maggots and interspersing them with quilting yoyos that were stuffed with cotton. Tassels made of black thread were attached to the ends. The piece was 50 inches (length) by 1.5 inches (width) by 40 inches (height).



Figure12. Specimen



Figure 13. Specimen Detail



Figure 14. Precious Hygiene

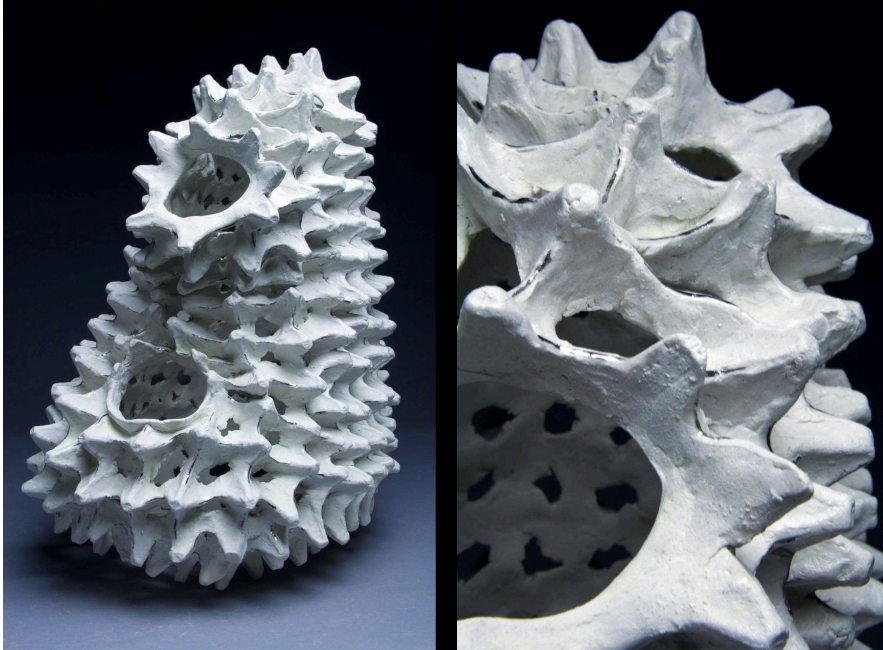


Figure 15. Consumption On Eggshells



Figure 16: To Give and To Get



Figure 17. Reminders



Figure 18. Reminders Detail

The last series of figures document the display of my final Undergraduate Exhibition. Although the four aspects of this exhibition can be viewed as separate pieces, they were documented in the gallery space as interacting together. Therefore, Figure 19 conveys the interaction of the piece entitled, “Shroud”, and the pieces entitled, “Interchange”. Figure 20 is the documentation of the “Shroud” on its own. The piece was made of earthenware, ink, fabric, cotton, and wood; and measures 16 inches (length) by 2 inches (wide) by 22 inches (height). Figure 21 is a detailed image of a selected few objects as part of the series entitled, “Interchange”. This series followed the series called “To Give and To Get” and were created with a wide variety of manipulated and found materials. The objects sit on a flat rectangle of black clay, which is mounted on the wall against a paper backing that is sewed to batting. The sewed paper is secured to the wall using upholstery tacks. The last piece in the show was a series of pedestals created as a record of my violent actions against the cone shaped earthenware. Small tops and bottoms that were inspired by ottomans were made of black clay. Objects that resembled the objects within the series entitled “Interchange” were placed on the tops of the pedestals. Figures 22 and 23 are documentations of these pieces, which was 14 inches (length) by 10 inches (width) by 50 inches (height).



Figure 19: Shroud and Interchange



Figure 20. Shroud



Figure 21. Interchange



Figure 22. Forgive My Transgressions



Figure 23. Forgive My Transgression Detail